Right-Hearted

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ABSTRACT

A collection of short stories written in conformity with the requirements of The Writing Seminars for the Master of Fine Arts.

Table of Contents

The Friday After Thanksgiving, 1986

I am left with this: the five of us walking
in tight single-file up Fifth Avenue,
my grandfather taking so much time
at the rear: a shuffling tan coat,
belted, as was the fashion, and my grandmother
edging before him, but reaching back
with her hand for his, pulling him on.
Ahead of her goes my father, forty-four and ravenously
peering, as we press our way through
the damp, tightening crowd, under white-lit trees,
while before him walks my mother: soft-haunched
and innocent-mouthed, steering their son
by the narrow shoulders, him leading the way
to FAO Schwartz -- the wind bringing tears
to his eyes. Toys, paper cups of coffee, dinner,
the West Side highway, the black-tipped snow, the wild-eyed
men who fly forth to clean the windshield and vanish --

Long after this, my grandfather dies
at seventy-eight: a puffing of the ankles, a winnowing
of the voice; then my grandmother, eighteen years on,
remembering nothing except Queenie, her home health aide; then
my father, two months later, caught unawares by a stray
protein in the brain, leaves behind only
my mother and me, to wonder
if the order of things will hold.

This morning I receive a photograph of her
wading into the sea in Costa Rica, mere hours earlier --
hair dark and thick at her shoulders,
the gray obscured by water and sun,
back turned to the camera, to me.
I view this on my phone, in this bed, as
beside me, my wife opens her eyes.
"Give me your hand," she says, and places it
on her swollen belly. She then settles her hand over mine,
and waits as I feel for the flutter,
for that quaking of what is to come.

The Goombah

This was in downtown Chicago, a cold November night, 1992, at an almost pretty nice Italian place. I'm seventeen, three inches taller than my father, thirty pounds lighter, every bit as life-hungry but with a scowl on my face. My mother is newly alone at the house back in Framingham, and my father has moved to Back Bay, where he rents "an apartment with a very young woman," as my mother puts it, as though the apartment itself came equipped with her. He's a dentist, and I'm the freshman at the University of Chicago he brags about to the patients who lie prone and agape in his humming, pleather chair, their mouths mini construction sites of wire and cement.

There's an open bottle of wine between us, two long-stemmed glasses, two closed menus. The waiter has disappeared into the kitchen. I've got on a new band-collared shirt that my father bought me earlier in the day, along with the new brown bucks on my feet. He's bought himself a turquoise silk shirt that he has already invited a couple of perfect strangers to rub between their fingers -- "Go ahead, touch it, silk," he says. When he swallows, the puff of chest-hair up by his throat dips and rises; and each time he crosses and uncrosses his legs, he kicks my shins beneath the table. I wonder if he knows it.

At the table next to us is a heavy-set man in a purple suit. He has an enormous, cleft face, like a pair of barely-parted theater curtains, from behind which his tiny nose and mouth and dark, narrow-set eyes peep through. But his voice is loud, rather than muffled by all that flesh. He has a hard, stubby laugh, and as he talks, he points in the air with long, billy-club fingers. His companion is silent, dressed in black, with an excess of cuff -- both jacket and shirt -- dangling from his thin white wrists. As he listens to the

man in purple, the man in black twirls an unlit cigarette through his fingers, sending it pirouetting out over his knuckles then trapping it with his thumb. No one else is in the restaurant. I tell myself they're mobsters, real Chicago mobsters.

My father and I have just come from Marshall Field's. Shopping bags are clustered at our feet. An odd choice for a father-son outing, but he wanted me to look sharp, for the two of us to walk around Chicago looking sharp. It's nighttime now and we've done all our walking. Tomorrow morning he flies home. Leaning in over the table, he beckons for me to lean in, too. "Goombahs," he whispers. He flicks his eyes at the table next to us, smiles at me expectantly. I don't say anything back.

In the silence, my father crosses his legs once more, and catches me in the knee with the toe of his loafer. This is when the man in the purple suit turns in his seat, away from the man in black, and looks at me. I feel this as it happens, the emptying out of the air between us, his eyes fixed on the side of my head. "You look so serious," is what he says. "Why so serious?"

My father laughs. He smiles as if the man in the purple suit were the comedian at a nightclub -- the part of the act where they mix it up with the crowd.

"I mean, look at him," the man in purple says to my father, pointing at me. "The kid looks like he wants to shoot you in the head." Somehow, my father still has the I'm-getting-my-money's-worth smile on his face. Like it's stuck there.

The man in black stares straight ahead, still twirling his cigarette, as the man in purple leans forward in his pivoted chair and rests his elbows on our table. He forms a triangle with his thick fingers and sets his chin on top of the triangle. Up close, he smells like leather inside of a car. "So what are you two talking about?" he says.

"Issues," I tell him. "We're talking about issues." It's a word my mother would use. My father looks at me, his smile slackening, then back at the man in purple.

"Issues," the man in purple says, auditioning the word. His eyes soften for a moment as he takes me in.

"Look," my father says, doubling down on the smile. "We're just tourists." I'm not smiling. I think: I'm no tourist here; this is my city now. What I'm wishing he would say is: That's my son. But not with a smile, more like this: That's my son you're talking to.

Perhaps the man in purple registers this on my face. Ignoring my father, he eases his chin up from the fingertips, but only a little. "So what are these 'issues'?" he says.

"There's no issues," says my father. "We're just out having a good time. Just like everyone else." With his arm, he gives a quick sweeping gesture at the empty dining room.

The man in the purple suit smiles, still dead-eying me. "He's not having a good time," he says. "Are you?" I glance at the big bones of his wrists -- Chicago bones. "Are you," he says again.

"No," I say.

"You see?" he says, turning for a second to my father. "You're not out having a good time." Then he comes back to me, inching closer on his elbows, his voice hushed, low. "So tell me," he says. "What do you want me to do?"

My father gives a little laugh.

"Marco, let'em be," says the man in black. He addresses this to the bottom of his rocks glass.

"You know what I think this kid wants?" says the man in purple, to no one in particular now. "I think he wants me to shoot his old man in the head, just like I said before. That's it, isn't it?"

My father gives one more very small laugh, from the very top of his throat. Then he lifts his wine glass and sits back with it, looking over the brim at the man in purple. Behind my father is a large, plate-glass window, and through it we can just hear the taxis hissing by.

"So what's a guy to do? Do I shoot him in the head?" the man in purple says. He's raised his chin fully off the tips of the fingers now, and gives a little lift of his eyebrows. My father is making a slight whistling sound, breathing through a small hole between two of his front teeth. I've known him to make this sound my whole life.

The man in purple now rises to his feet. "OK," he says. He places one hand on the back of my chair to steady himself, and reaches with the other into his coat. Listening to the rustle of his clothes, I picture it: the heavy gun sliding free of its holster, the slow raising of the barrel; my father's emptied-out eyes. I decide that the man in the purple suit lets me live to tell the tale; and that because of this, everyone I'll ever know, at some point I'll have no choice but to tell them. The women will respond with horror, sympathy, maybe interest. I'll say to them: "It's part of who I am." Then they'll tell their girlfriends: "It's part of who he is." Meantime, I'll visit a shrink who wears mostly corduroy, and at our final session he'll grip me by the shoulders and declare there's nothing wrong with me, never has been at all, and I'll march out of his office into the streets of Chicago, sharp as can be.

With his hand still deep in his coat, the man in purple gazes down at my father. My father tilts back his small head to look up at him. He has a delicate neck, my father.

"Marco," says the man in black into his rocks glass. The pores of his nose are wide and glistening. He is very thin.

Slowly, the man in the purple suit removes his hand from his coat, and places the hand on my father's shoulder, where it starts to slip. The man in purple pinches a bit of the material between his forefinger and thumb, and rubs it back and forth, watching how it glides. "Real silk," he says. My father nods. Then the man in purple lets go, takes a step back. He picks up his chair and sets it down again at his own table. But before he sits, he gives me one final raise of the eyebrows. *Well?* the eyebrows say. *Last chance.*

Now my father's eyes are the ones I feel, pressing on the side of my head. They're the ones I still feel. And I want so badly to say that I shook my head no, just as I'm shaking it now. Or that I at least said no with my eyes. That I didn't just sit there as the man in the purple suit sat down, gave a small shrug, speared a tenderloin medallion with his fork and put the whole thing in his mouth. That I had said to him: that's my father. But more like this: that's my father you're talking to. My father. My only one.

Connecticut Shade

At night at Stone's Farm in the summer of 1931, the thing to do was fight, and this was done in the tobacco sheds. There was no electric light, so we'd bring out the lanterns from the bunks and arrange them on the dirt floor in a ring, and then fight in that ring, with the overhanging tobacco leaves stinging the fighters' eyes. If you fought, you were in the light, and if you didn't, you were in the dark, so that only the fighters could be seen. Everyone watched, and, sooner or later, everyone fought.

Except me. I was small-boned and slow-moving, and lacked the desire to harm or be harmed by the other boys, no matter how cruel or stupid or deserving they were, or I was. I'd taken to a kind of hiding in plain sight, as if aiming to prove I wasn't really there. And so I spent the days waiting and watching, as if for a great cloud-bank to pass slowly overhead without bursting.

Our father had gotten a job that year delivering bread for a bakery near our home in Springfield, Massachusetts, and my older brother Jacob and I often went with him, running loaves up to doorsteps while the car stayed running, or working the wipers when it rained. The route took us all over the western half of Massachusetts, from Palmer to Pittsfield, and sometimes over the borders into Vermont and Connecticut. On a Sunday morning in early June, we had our biggest delivery yet, to a place called Stone's Farm in Windsor Locks, just north of Hartford. Even with the windows down, we couldn't stop sweating from the heat of the loaves packed in around us. Our father, gripping the wheel, made no stops, and was quiet the whole way down.

We found Stone's Farm spread on the banks of the Farmington River, the fields covered with low white tents. Beneath the tents grew stout, thick-leafed plants. Two

gleaming new Fords baked in the driveway of the farmhouse, and forty or so dirt-lacquered boys around Jacob's and my age could be seen rummaging and crawling about in the fields. The air was thick and damp and our ears filled with the steady wail of invisible insects. Now and then, a blast of sun split through the cloud cover and landed hard on our heads. Stone's manager, Earl Douglas, had ordered eight dozen loaves of black bread for the pickers; he walked out to meet our father.

Douglas was thin and bone-faced with burnt brown skin that clung tightly to his skull beneath a straw hat. When our father asked him what the crop was, Douglas looked as if he'd asked what country we were in, and then spat on the ground. Before our eyes was the finest wrapper-leaf tobacco in the whole world, he said. Everyone in the industry knew that, from Cuba to Nicaragua. Why, even people not in the cigar business knew that. It was called Connecticut Shade, on account of this being Connecticut and the tobacco being grown under shade. It was simply the best there was. Pop seemed impressed. He gazed off at the boys in the fields, and asked, "How much you pay'em?"

Earl Douglas gave a little smile. "Seventy-five bucks a boy. For the summer." He looked at Jacob and me appraisingly. "I could do eighty-five for the bigger one."

Our father nodded to himself, then turned towards us. He placed a hand on each of our shoulders, and I watched the gray stubble of his chin move up and down. I knew then we weren't going home. He said: "There's nothing for you boys in Springfield. You understand?" Jacob nodded for the both of us.

It was true. Though Springfield still had the Armory, Smith and Wesson, and Milton Bradley, fewer and fewer men seemed to have work at those places or anywhere else. Plenty of boys' fathers just waited on line, or else hid themselves in their cold-water

flats, fighting with their wives and listlessly smoking in back bedrooms. The boys, hungry and hollow-cheeked, were left to fight in the alleys below, rougher and rougher as they grew and made ready for the world.

Pop's stubble-covered chin kept bobbing as he told us how we'd all make due -- the three of us -- from here on out; that this was called doing what had to be done. "It's one summer," he said. "One single summer in a whole long life. *Im yirtzeh Hashem*." Then he handed us each a five-dollar bill and a bread-sack with changes of clothes he must have packed the night before. We watched as he got back in the bakehouse Ford by himself, squeezing in amidst the undelivered loaves. "And you, Goliath," he said to Jacob as he started the engine. "Watch over this boychick of ours." Then he headed back out to the rutted highway, turned the wheel north, and was gone.

Jacob and I gripped our bread sacks. When we turned around, we saw that Earl Douglas had been standing there the whole while, with most of the boys crowded up and staring from behind him, the heavy sun in their faces.

Four of these boys, we discovered, were Jews: a short, quick-witted one from Hartford who wore glasses; a quiet fellow from Enfield with an old man's face; and twins from Holyoke, scions of a recently-bankrupt rug empire. Izzy Gross, sixteen and all of five-feet-two, was the boy from Hartford. He made his way to us first, pumped our hands, and gave what seemed like a wink through the filthy lenses of his glasses. "You two sure travel light," he said, gesturing at our bread-sacks. "Come on, I'll take you to the villa." He led Jacob and me up a path to a long wooden bunkhouse shared by the Jewish boys with eight rail-thin Italians, who stashed cured meats in paper wrappers under their beds and promised to slit our throats if it ever went missing. They

demonstrated on each other the long, throat-slitting motion. "Which means," Izzy said, with a flick of his fingers beneath his chin, "simply ask the kind gentlemen if you'd like some." He then directed us to a pair of cots which appeared to be recent additions, shoved tightly into a corner perpendicular to the others.

The Poles and the Irish, Izzy explained, each had their own bunks, Jews and Italians being considered somehow less strange bedfellows. Earl Douglas, meanwhile, had a small cabin in the middle of the yard with an electric line running to it from the farmhouse. He had a radio that at night perched in the cabin's window; and through this window you could see his small white cot and green army blanket, no different from our own. The Stones themselves -- whom one seldom saw -- had just returned from a tour of Europe, on account of which we were to be extra quiet while they re-learned how to sleep in America.

That evening, Jacob and I ate supper in the yard out among the other boys, staring fixedly at our plates to avoid their eyes. A fat, short-legged terrier sauntered out from the house and wove among the various ankles until it reached us; when I looked down at him, he bared his teeth.

When we finished eating, Jacob and I slipped back to the bunk and waited for the sky to darken. The air filled with the sound of crickets -- legions of them. Beneath the crickets came the faint sound of a radio.

"Jacob," I said, "do you think Mama knows we're here?"

My brother lay on his back, drumming his fingers on his breastbone. "Can't see what difference it makes," he said.

"But do you think she knows?"

Jacob seemed to think it over, gazing up at the black windowpane. "No, Sammy," he said. "I don't."

Breakfast was at six-thirty sharp, and work at seven. Each boy had a pruning knife and a basket and we went out under the tents to cut away the sucker leaves, which grew low on the stalks and could suck the life-blood from a tobacco plant. We were mostly on our hands and knees, which put us on intimate terms with the black, river-fed soil. There was little talk before lunchtime -- talk being laborious in the heat -- and what words we had were muted by the thick, dew-soaked plants we crawled among.

We collected the cut leaves in our baskets and dumped them into a wheel-barrow that grew heavier and heavier as the day wore on; but Earl Douglas said never to empty the wheel-barrow until it was full, so as not to waste time -- apparently the worst thing a person could ever do. Jacob was picked to push the wheel-barrow on account of being the largest and stockiest among us, and by three o'clock in the afternoon both his palms were bleeding. Every minute or so he'd let go the handles to spit in his hands; then he'd press them together and open them up slowly with a stricken face.

Our pruning knives had wooden handles worn smooth as could be, and I passed the time imagining what other boys might have used my particular knife before me, what sorts of lives they might have gone on to -- as bank-robbers, pilots, hobos. Probably most of them were still nearby, though I wondered if any had had to run far away from home, or had died heroically, or merely young. I didn't know anyone yet who'd died or had moved to or from anywhere far away, unless you counted Europe, the awful place

everyone's parents had come from, or else the Westfield State Sanatorium, where Mama had gone when she lost hold of her coughing.

Coming back from the fields that evening, our backs hurt like old men's backs, and our tongues sat dry and swollen in our mouths. Earl Douglas showed us how to work the cistern, and there was black bread and kielbasa for supper. Jacob and I had never had kielbasa before, which we knew to be made from ground-up swine, and we agreed not to tell Pop we'd eaten it. Tuning out Izzy's chatter, we ate beneath a makeshift canopy of tobacco tents that still smelled strongly of leaves. We sat on rough-hewn benches, and kept an elbow on the table, bending low over our bowls. And so went our days.

But certain nights after dinner, Earl Douglas would hoist his radio into the window of his cabin and put on The Lone Ranger or The Witch's Tale. Radio Hour, as we called it, was also when fights were decided on. A boy with a scowl would wander through the darkened yard waiting for someone to look him in the eye, and then he'd decide he didn't like the way that other boy looked, and he'd point at the fellow and say: "You." Everyone knew what "you" meant. I made sure to have my eyes pointed down at this time of night and waited for the feet of the boy who wanted a fight to pass me by, never minding if he muttered "kike" under his breath. I just imagined I was off in old Nevada with the Lone Ranger and Tonto. At first, Jacob looked down, too. But I could feel him twitching in the grass beside me, and I knew that the vibrations in his body were those of a great gear turning slowly inside him, tooth by tooth. One night during our second week at the farm, this gear finished its rotation, and I looked over to see my brother sitting fully upright, craning his neck.

Jacob's torso was especially long, so that his head was perched higher than those of the other boys. Tommy Dwyer, the Irish boy who said "you" to Jacob that night, was not much bigger than me, with freckled skin and flitting eyes. He was thin, but had shoulders broadened by labor. When Dwyer poked his finger down at Jacob's nose, Jacob made as though to stand up right there and then, but Izzy laid a hand on Jacob's shoulder. "Wait," Izzy said.

"What in the hell for?" said Jacob. But he allowed Izzy's hand to stay.

After the Lone Ranger finished his exploit, and lights-out was called, we went back to the bunk. Jacob paced back and forth with heavy footsteps in the thick yellow lantern light, as we all watched, including the eight Italians, who sat cross-legged on their beds. A half hour later, it was time. Izzy took up the lantern and we walked out across the cool gray grass to the barn furthest from the Stones' house, where we'd just hung plants to dry that day. The sullen boy from Enfield, and the twins went with us; the Italians came after. Each bunk made its way to the barn, each with its lantern. The Irish walked with each boy resting a hand on the shoulder of the boy in front of him, which I couldn't help but admire. Dwyer led them with the lantern, knotting his brows and glaring at the ground ahead.

Once inside the barn, Dwyer took off his shirt and his vertebra glowed like half moons. He bounced on the balls of his feet, his freckles deepened and multiplied in the lantern-light. Jacob wore the same shirt he worked in every day. He walked out to the middle of the ring and stood with his hands at his sides, impassive as an icebox. Dwyer looked Jacob over, circling him, turning now and then to his bunkmates, who hooted and jeered. Slowly, Jacob raised his fists to his ears. Dwyer then cut short his circling, and

leapt fully into the air, swinging for Jacob's jaw. Jacob lurched backwards at the impact, and then stared with a kind of drunken amazement, the mark of the blow already darkening his cheek. He and Dwyer circled each other now, Jacob sidestepping on his stubby feet. This time, Jacob rushed at Dwyer, who kicked him in the knee as he drew close, then struck Jacob again, hard across the mouth.

The Irish bunk cheered, pressing tightly around the ring.

"Come on, Jacob, he's a bum!" said Izzy. There was something halting in his voice.

Jacob lumbered now, on his heels. His head lolled, and bore a kind of half-smile. Dwyer made to close in for the kill, weaving in with fists raised. Jacob's eyes for a moment passed dimly over my own. Then, like a drunk who suddenly regains himself, he lurched forward and seized Dwyer about the chest, lifting him in a great bear hug. Dwyer's feet kicked in the air; I could see the holes in the bottoms of his shoes.

"Keep at it, Jacob!" said Izzy, edging closer to the ring's invisible border. With the Irish boy trapped in his arms, grimacing and mashing his eyes, my brother swayed almost soothingly. Dwyer snapped his teeth at Jacob's ears and nose, but couldn't catch hold of him. Slowly, his face purpling, he slackened in Jacob's arms, his head drooping forward, like a child who, after some forgotten fuss, relents to being carried to bed. The Irish bunk grew quiet.

Afterwards, as Jacob lay in his cot, Izzy handed Jacob his half of the money: four dollars and twenty cents. Jacob slept with the bills curled inside his fist, as I listened for his heavy breaths late into the night. Shortly before dawn, I reached for his nostrils with the back of my hand. With a start, Jacob opened his eyes. The eyes locked in on my

own, though the rest of him didn't move, and I couldn't tell if he was truly awake. Then he reached out his hand, which still held the money, and opened it. The bills were hot and damp. "Hide it," he said. "Hide it now."

I took the bills and stole outside into the purple light. Walking the perimeter of the bunkhouse, I found an opening beneath the floor planks and crawled into it on my belly. I dug with my fingers a small hole in the depression of a pylon, and buried our winnings. When I returned inside, Jacob's eyes were closed, but his hand remained outstretched, the fingers cupped and barren.

Weeks passed. Nine more times, Jacob fought, in the same blind and staggering way; and each time he won. Mostly he fought the Poles, who were in the majority and hated us to the bone, unable to comprehend losing to a Jew -- even a giant one. But sometimes another Irish boy would summon the guts for it, despite, or perhaps because of, what had happened to Dwyer. And once Jacob had fought two of the Italians at the same time, a tall boy and a short one, the short one having hidden a stone in his hand, with which he tore loose the top of Jacob's ear. Earl Douglas had put white medical tape over that wound, which he said made Jacob resemble a doberman pinscher. Jacob could laugh at this because he was proud. And bigger than the other pickers -- strangely bigger -- so that even when he took blows to the gut that echoed out with hollow thuds and sent a collective "ooh" out over the dew-damp crowd and brought little chills out from my spine down through my balls, he could stay on his feet and win by attrition. Which is all to say that Jacob knew little about fighting per se, but that a part of him had grown to like

it. He could take a punch most anywhere at all and never scare easy -- things he could never teach me, and that I wished never to learn, even if he could.

He bet our spending money (both his and mine) on himself, and aside from once when the flap of his eyebrow slipped down over his eye, and he'd stayed up all night mumbling and gurgling to our poor lost mother, he never seemed in any real danger. Izzy took to calling him the Jewish Giant, and the name stuck. It seemed that so long as Jacob fought, the other four of us wouldn't have to, and that we all knew this to be so. The Holyoke twins regarded him with a silent reverence, which Jacob accepted as his due. Each morning, his bed was made, and each night his clothes were washed, and we all gave him what extra food could be secreted away at mealtimes. Even Earl Douglas seemed to grant Jacob a measure of deference, rarely addressing him, and lowering his voice when he did, in the manner of equals.

In all this adulation, and in the tacit bargain from which it arose, there was a tincture of shame. By fighting our battles, Jacob had assumed the mantle of not only his own manhood, but all of ours, and we allowed it to be so. Izzy did not seem to mind, but I felt it acutely; and in the fields, when I brought my basket of leaves to Jacob's wheelbarrow, I no longer met his eyes.

Then, on the fourth of July, the night before I turned fourteen, Jacob announced he was going to teach me to fight -- like it or not. It was in the bunk, just before dinner, the first time we'd been alone in some time. I reminded him that when our father had left us at Stone's Farm a month earlier, he'd trusted Jacob to take special care of me. Jacob said, "I am." He woke me at five the next morning, and we snuck outside. Spent fireworks from the night before still littered the torn-up yard by the creeping edge of the

field, and the phonograph Mr. Stone himself had brought out still spun and crackled on the porch of the house. Once inside the tobacco barn, we stood facing each other. Jacob waited as if to see what consternation or fury I could summon. He loomed, my brother did, blocking not just the doorway through which I might escape, but most of the light trying to get in, which had to slip around his enormous shoulders.

"Look at me," he said, and when he stepped toward me the light gathered tightly about him. But I wouldn't look. "Where are your eyes?" he said. He raised his fists to his ears. "Here it comes." Then he came for me, too fast on those thick legs, with the glint of a smile on his lips. I dove for his waist, which seemed the softest part of him, and he trapped my head in the meat of his arm, snapping my face close into his side. I could feel the warmth of his ribs against my jaw, and smelled the full sourness of his body, disarmingly similar to my own. He twisted until my face was pointed straight upwards, into his, and then he rolled me over his thigh onto the packed dirt floor. As I started to get up he kicked me in the behind with the flat of his shoe. But then he backed off a ways, and watched as I rose to my feet.

"Now you come at me," he said.

"The hell with you," I said. But I walked towards him, fists raised, girding myself. Three feet short of him, I stopped and waited. Jacob took a step towards me, bits of straw crunching beneath his shoes. He seemed to study my face a moment, then reared back, and with an open fist struck the side of my head. The weight of the blow felt like a sandbag tossed from a roof; my legs gave way.

On the ground, my ears rang, and the fumes of the drying tobacco plants seared my lungs. "Damn you, Jacob," I said. "Maybe you like being bear-baited and murdered

by Polacks, but not me." He stood right over me, but I didn't move. "And how about if I die, what'll you tell Pop then?"

"No one's dying, Sammy," Jacob said. "No one's murdering no one." He pushed at my knee with his foot.

"Oh really? Mom's dying. Or had you forgotten about that, too busy being the Jewish Giant?" I leaned back on my elbows, but looked off to the side.

"Get up," said Jacob. "Get the hell up." I started to stand, still avoiding his eyes, and he slapped me across the mouth. I sat back at his feet, touching my lips. "*Now* look at me," he said.

This time I looked. Though Jacob's features did not always resemble our mother's, from certain angles or in certain light, or when I allowed my vision to blur just so, her whole face would bloom forth within his, as if rising to its surface. It had been happening ever since Pop had driven her off to Westfield and then come home alone. I saw her there now. Jacob sat down beside me, and wrapped his arms around his knees. "You can't talk like that," he said, softly. I turned away, but felt his eyes on the side of my head. Then, slowly, he reached out and put his hand on my back. For a while, he just kept it there. Eventually, I turned and looked at him. His eyes seemed to shimmer. "I'm sorry," he said. I nodded. He waited another moment, then said, "You know what a one-two is, don't you?"

We rose to our feet and again stepped apart from each other. With my eyes trained just below his chin, I threw a jab and a right cross at my brother's wide, dark face, and he caught them in his palms. "Again," Jacob said, and again I threw, daring gradually to look upwards, as Mama's face worked its way free.

Over and over, I swung for my brother's face. Somehow, in the midst of getting pummeled, he'd learned to box. Catching my punches in his palms, he grinned, and when I dropped my guard he cuffed my ears. My bob and weave, he said, was no good. Every time, instead of bending at the knees, I leaned forward at the waist, all but begging for the uppercut. Finally, Jacob reached down and caught my jaws in his fingers mid-weave. Pinching my mouth, he tilted my face up towards his. "Where are you?" he said. I spat, half-wishing teeth would come out in his palm. He let go, and I dropped my hands to my sides, heaving for air. "I won't," I said. "Fight anyone."

"Don't be so sure," Jacob said. Then he feinted with a left hook. "Weave."

Then one morning at the end of August, we took down the tents. It was nearing harvest time, and we could feel Earl Douglas watching us extra close. Mr. Stone even appeared now and then on the porch of his house with a pair of binoculars. "You know how much these plants fetch?" Izzy said to me as we picked. "Fifteen thousand a harvest." Izzy chewed on bits of leaves he'd torn off the plants. His teeth were brown. "You ever do the math?" he said. "Pure profit. Stone probably pays less than three thousand for all of us boys; maybe five or six hundred for Earl Douglas; a thousand or so for seeds and supplies; maybe five or ten percent to a broker; but no rent or nothing. So I'm figuring they clear seven or eight grand in profit, just for owning this place and being named Stone. Imagine that: earning eight grand in a summer just on account of your name."

I tried to imagine it, but couldn't. Instead, I thought of the twenty-one dollars hidden beneath the bunk on account of what Jacob did -- or who he was. The sun was

horrific on our backs and necks as the day wore on, and as all the white tents came down, the brilliant browns and greens of the field were revealed. I rolled up the gauzy white sheets with Izzy, slapping the dirt free and tying them with twine. Then we bundled up the stakes. During our break, I tried flipping one of the stakes up in the air and catching it, like Jacob and I had done back home with sticks, pretending we were soldiers drilling with our rifles. Izzy watched. I practiced throwing the stake higher and higher, catching it every time. Then I'd swing it across my body and slam it into my shoulder and call out, "Uh-ten-CHUN!"

"Hey Sammy," Izzy said, "I bet you can't flip that thing five times in the air and catch it."

"A quarter says I can," I said. He nodded. I tossed the stake up in the air, counted five tumbles, caught it, and Izzy fished a quarter out of his sock.

"Double or nothing," he said. Then: "Wait. Seven times." I threw the stake up again, higher, and counted seven tumbles. Izzy fished out two more slimy quarters.

Caught up in the moment, I'd failed to notice the Polish boys who'd come over to watch. One of them, Kostroski, came up to me then, and stared until I stopped tossing the stake. He was about my size. He said: "You some kind of Jew majorette?" Then he pushed me, hard, between the collar bones. Jacob was nowhere near. "Majorette's tongue-tied," Kostroski said. "But tell you what: two dollars if you can flip it a dozen times."

"You don't have two dollars," Izzy said.

"The hell I don't, Shylock," said Kostroski. "Two bucks for a dozen flips."

Izzy took a step back and turned to me. Subtly, he shook his head. Off in the distance I could see Mr. Stone standing up on his shaded porch. Then I looked at Kostroski. I tossed the stake up as high as I could, and Izzy counted off the tumbles: "...nine, ten, eleven, twelve!"

The stake landed with a sting in my palm. Kostroski snatched it away. He poked the tip at my Adam's Apple. "I counted ten," he said, "not twelve. You lost." I looked towards Izzy, but saw him standing with each of his skinny arms gripped by one of Kostroski's friends. They then dumped Izzy face-first into the ground. Kostroski laughed and tossed the stake far out over the field, among the unpicked plants. "You can pay me tonight," he said. My blood was coursing so hard that my neck felt dammed up. Then a shadow came over the faces of Kostroski and his friends.

"Go find that stake," said a deeper voice behind and above me. I turned around and saw Earl Douglas, mounted on his old mare, blackened by the overhanging sun.

That evening there was bean soup and corn bread for dinner, and a bushel of dirt-covered cucumbers dumped out on one of the picnic tables, which no one took much interest in. Before coming out to eat, I'd crawled underneath the bunk and fetched a two-dollar bill for Kostroski. I had it now in my shoe. As we ate, I avoided Jacob's eyes. "You ever think about Pop delivering the bread without us?" he said. "Trying to work the wipers by himself in the rain?"

"No," I said, not moving my eyes from the Polish tables.

"No," he said back. "I didn't think so." He took a spoonful of soup, blowing on it first. "Pop'd always swipe a few stale loaves to bring home, you know. And Mama would put them in the oven with a little cup of water underneath, to loosen them up

again. But you already knew that." Kostroski gave a quick look my way; he seemed close to being done. "That's why when you ripped a piece off the loaf," Jacob went on, "the steam'd pour out and burn your hand." Jacob waved a hand in front of my face, then reached into my bowl and took my spoon away. "Look at me," he said. I did, and his eyes bored into mine. Then I watched as he turned and hurled my spoon over his shoulder at the Poles' table, where it landed in one of their bowls with a splash. All the voices died down.

Jacob stood up. "One of you Polacks wanna bring back my brother's spoon?" he said. What light remained in the twilit sky seemed to gather then in a single beam pointed down at my head. A moment later, Kostroski came over, holding my spoon. He passed by Jacob, who didn't make a move, and pointed the spoon at my chest. "You," he said.

One night when I was a young child, while watching my mother cook dinner, I'd watched her slice her knuckle on the edge of a serrated blade. Quickly, she'd brought the knuckle up to her lips and when she took it away there was blood around her mouth. Blood was what came to the mouth, one way or another, in the end. Tonight, I realized, I would bleed from the mouth; Kostroski the Pole would bleed me. I wondered how it would feel and imagined a sense of dissipation, of nauseating tragedy. It had been just this way when our mother had said goodbye to Jacob and me before driving off with Pop to Westfield: how hard she'd tried not to cough as he settled her into the car, and how when she did cough, inevitably, her whole body had seized and clenched around the cough itself as though it were a huge and important structure she alone had been

entrusted to hold up. "I'm sorry," she'd said, gazing at us through the open window. And as she spoke, she'd started to raise the handkerchief, which was a bright red, to her eyes; but quickly Pop had pulled down her arm so that we caught only a glimpse of it, and then he drove her far away, to bleed alone.

I remembered this when, after dinner, Earl Douglas put on The Fleischmann's Yeast Hour variety show, to which most of the boys sat listening with their palms stretched behind them in the brown grass, though I heard not a word. Before the show ended, I wended my way back through the grass toward the bunk. I had it in mind to take our money, and my bag of clothes, and to go. I would walk north on the highway, and by morning I might reach Springfield. I'd tell Pop that I'd almost been killed, and that Jacob had made it that way, and I'd tell him all that the world had become. On the way to the bunk, I stopped on the path to throw up. Bent over with my hands on my knees, I studied the puddle of my vomit in the moonlight. I breathed in its acrid, embarrassing smell. That's my inside smell, I thought.

In the dark empty bunk, I gathered up my clothes. Then I sat and waited on Jacob's cot, gazing from there at my own bed, with the army blanket folded at the foot. I saw myself lying there the next day wrapped in bandages like a blown-to-bits soldier, with a bloody mouth hole in my gauze-encased head to gurgle and breathe through. Earl Douglas would dock me for missing work, and my father would argue with him over the lost wages.

Why should you not pay for the boy's full labor? my father would ask. Because your boy didn't put in, Earl Douglas would say. "Putting in" was what Earl Douglas called it when you were supposed to do something you didn't necessarily like but had to

do in order for the whole thing to work -- the whole thing being the world itself. I'd never been much for putting in, I realized. Our father put in; Jacob put in; the crisply-burnt Irish kids put in; the thick-necked Poles put in; even the skittering, boastful Italians, with their leathery backs and hunger-pinched mouths, they put in. All of it, all of life, was putting in; that's what people just knew, one way or another, to do, and did. Otherwise, what became of you? What became of anyone or anything?

Jacob came into the bunk while the Fleischmann's Yeast Hour was still blaring over the yard. He stood over me, the floor boards seeming to bow beneath his weight, but I wouldn't look up. I listened to him breathing, and felt the money lying in wait below. "Show me your one-two," he said. I stared at the rough planks under his feet. His toes moved in his shoes. "One-two," he said. "One-two, one-two," as if the numbers were an incantation. He then showed me his own one-two, stepping between the beds, flinging quick, sharp blows into the dark. Dropping his hands, he sat down on the cot beside me, his cot. For a moment, he said nothing, and just gazed straight ahead. Then he roused himself again. "One-two, one-two," he said, as though certain the words would flip some switch inside me. "One-two, one-two." Slowly, he wrapped his huge arm around my shoulders, with the wrist looped half-way across my chest. He pressed his fingers into my breastbone. And somehow we took to rocking together, my brother and I, back and forth, side to side, on his cot, as though far out at sea. He squeezed me about the ribs, and I could smell his oceanic scent, the salt and musk of my brother.

Slowly I looked up at the thick black hairs sprouting from the underside of his jaw. Then higher my eyes rose, over the full lips, the oddly small nose, the slicks of his wet brown eyes. "One-two," said Jacob. One, two, I said in my mind, in rhythm with the

rocking. One, two. Then I said it out loud: "One, two." Jacob gripped me tighter. "One-two," I said. I broke free of his arm and rose to my feet. Jacob now sat looking upwards, his eyes glistening. "One-two, one-two," I said. One and two.

The Fleischmann's Variety Hour by then had ended, and Izzy stood watching us from the corner by the door. He took up the lantern, doing his best to look away from Jacob and me as he lit it. Shaking the match, he carefully turned the lantern's nozzle until the small yellow flame ceased its wavering and stood tall in the glass. "I don't know whether to bet on you or what," Izzy said.

"Bet on him," said Jacob. Then he brought me out into the gray-glowing night, with his hands on my shoulders, and the grass brushed our shins as we marched.

Inside the tobacco barn were the four lit lanterns and the stinging-sweet smell of the harvested leaves, drying up above. Kostroski stood before me on the hard-packed dirt and behind him the Polish boys' faces hovered like ghosts. Kostroski wore knickers and no shirt, and his ribs were each pressed tight to his skin like a starving dog's. His oily black hair fell at the middle of his brow in a tight point, just above his eyes.

"You bring my two bucks?" he said.

I shook my head. "It's my two bucks."

Kostroski grinned, and came stalking out towards me. As he drew near, I swung wildly, and he ducked. Then around me he danced, his thin ankles lithe in the dust. My eyes blurred with tears from the tobacco fumes as Kostroski flitted in and out of my vision. Every so often, he stopped his circling, popping in towards me with a quick jab. I felt little pain, but kept my fists up at my ears, all the same. Kostroski changed the direction of his side-stepping, and I began to circle opposite him, faster and faster in the

orange half-light. Then he stopped again and came at me, more determinedly now, raining down blows as though he had multiple arms. I hid behind my fists and heard the thudding echo of someone's ribs being struck, the back of someone's head, someone's belly, and watched my feet rocking back and forth, side to side.

One-two. I swung, wildly again, but this time connected with Kostroski's collar bone, sending him back a step, and saw the tightening in his eyes. I followed with a right cross, landing it on the top of his sternum, just below the throat. "Again, Sammy!" Jacob called. But Kostroski had managed to appear off to my side, and I felt the wincing pain of his fist in my ribs. I tried to dance away again but my feet were slower now. Kostroski pursued me, twitching his head and feinting as he closed the distance. I stared into his face as it began to blur, as he struck me again, and we whirled once more, faster and faster, our feet seeming to skim just over the dirt floor.

Again, our muddied, reed-thin bodies locked together in combat, and again they broke apart. I came at Kostroski with a series of jabs, connecting with one to his nose. His eyes flashed and he dove for my belly. I struck him on the spine with my knuckles, and he let go. When he rose up, I caught him square in the eye with my right fist, and he wobbled on his toes. But he came forward again and struck me in the mouth. I no longer cared what happened to me, or that fighting was a foolish, low thing; within the violence I felt neither pity nor shame nor exaltation, but an almost incorporeal oneness, a feeling of my place in the world, if such a thing can be felt. As I see it now, in my mind's eye, it was as if we had risen, Kostroski and I, somewhere high above the overhanging leaves and the barn itself; over the dark slumbering fields and Earl Douglas's homely cabin; over the farmhouse with the two gleaming Fords in its driveway; over the paved private

road and the long dirt highway, and above the endless blank of the country beyond. Into the very tip of the night.

And perhaps it was there that Kostroski brought us down, stealing the wind from my belly with a body blow, and then striking me, I was later told, flush in the temple.

I came to, gazing up into the undulating leaves. Above me was a face like my mother's, the fingers of one hand raised to its lips, the other hand dabbing at me with a cloth. "You did good," said my brother's voice.

"Yeah. Real good," Izzy said. Above my face he held the lantern, and I lay there smiling, in the light.

The next morning, I felt wobbly on my feet. Sitting cross-legged on their beds, the Italians offered me slices of their precious salami and cheese, which I devoured. "Go easy," said Izzy. Earl Douglas peered from beneath his hat as Izzy and Jacob walked me slowly out to the fields. Izzy stayed at my side, and told a long, meandering story in which Dick Tracy finds out he's secretly Jewish. Every now and then, he stopped telling the story and said, "You still with me?" I said that I was. We worked. In the distance, I watched as Jacob heaved his wheelbarrow back towards the barn. I wondered what this place would do without us. The fields needed us, it seemed, as if to bear the burden of what they'd begun.

On the Friday of that week, just before the harvest had ended, Jacob and I came back from the fields to find our father's bakehouse Ford parked in Mr. Stone's driveway. Pop, who seemed to have grown smaller, sat in a folding chair on the grass, fanning himself with his hat. Earl Douglas stood beside him. Our father held in his hand an

envelope, and he told Jacob and me to go collect our things. We didn't have any things, we said. Didn't he remember how he'd left us there with nothing? But at this, he simply stared; and we stared back at the strange hollows beneath his eyes.

We stuffed our extra shirts back in the bread sacks. Then I crawled beneath the bunkhouse for the money we'd buried, and took that, too. Izzy watched me emerge with the stack of bills, which I handed to Jacob. "Not a bad haul," he said, as I brushed the dirt off my clothes. The three of us shook hands, and then Izzy turned abruptly, avoiding our eyes, and hastened off to get his dinner, the Holyoke twins close at his heels.

Jacob and I threw our bread sacks in the bakehouse Ford and drove back down the private road that led from Stone's Farm to the rutted dirt highway, which wouldn't be fully paved for another fifteen years. Our father drove us north. Every now and then he reached out and grabbed one of our ears or noses and gave an incredulous smile. But he seemed unable to speak, and said nothing of the bruises and bumps on our faces. We watched him drive and dodged his reaching fingers, and studied the new wrinkles that had ringed his throat and dug burrows in the wells of his eyes.

Chernobyl

In 1986, when I turned eight, my parents presented me with a laminated badge. It had a hole punched in its corner for a necklace to be threaded through, and contained my smiling photograph, our address in Silver Spring, Maryland, and the home and work telephone numbers for both my parents. Beneath this, in larger print, it said: "My name is Sara Meyers and I am a Liberated Child."

We lived just beyond the borders of the District, on a side street near Georgia Avenue, and my school was about a mile away. When three o'clock rolled around, I walked home. My parents had rehearsed this walk with me several times during the summer before I started third grade; and soon enough I was doing it on my own, wholly without incident. Perhaps disappointingly so. The way was safely marked with sidewalks and crosswalks and well-functioning traffic lights and plenty of dependable-looking people out and about. It took twenty-five minutes, door to door. I'd pass by two barber shops, three Ethiopian restaurants, and a small shopping plaza where I was to be mindful of any circling cars; then I'd traverse a pedestrian bridge near Montgomery College, and, upon reaching the other side, on all but the rainiest days, I would immediately spot the green and white sign for Edgewood Lane, and home.

Few people spoke to me during these walks. Hardly anyone stared, either, at least not that I noticed. Perhaps the badge dangling over my chest made me look official, to the extent that an eight-year-old girl can. But if you'd seen me and paused to take me in, with my prim, businesslike face, waiting for the walk-sign, you'd have thought to yourself: that kid knows what she's doing.

My father was a self-styled civil rights lawyer. This meant that he took most any case that came through his door, but that the downtrodden were closest to his heart -- perhaps because he counted himself among them. His business cards said: "Harold Meyers, Esq., CHAMPION for Civil Rights," and he wore a laminated one conspicuously around his neck, in what I took to be a show of solidarity with me, but which was, in fact, his sole means of advertising. He rented a grim, one-room office in a strip-mall where his neighbors were a pupuseria and a palm-reader; and on his train rides to work he brandished his card while repeating "Abogado, lawyer, abogado, lawyer" to a clientele as yet unaware of its grievances. My mother, a paralegal for the general counsel's office at the Department of Agriculture, suffered from Crohn's Disease. This meant that she was constantly either "on leave" or else devising strategies with my father for "taking leave," phrases I thought unfitting for what she actually did, which was remain, at all times, inside the house -- in her bedroom, to be specific, with the television on, and the covers pulled high.

All of this is to say there were reasons for me having a badge and being, as they now call it, free-range. Not that I ranged all that freely. School, home, and the stretch of Georgia Avenue between the two -- that was pretty much the extent of it, or very nearly so. Sometimes, you see, I ranged further. I'd turn off Georgia Avenue at Somerset Street and go to a park where I knew of a small playground, nondescript save for its particularly long and unblemished metal slide, and a swing set that sat atop a steep slope, so that when you jumped off in mid-flight, you remained airborne for what seemed an astonishingly, almost agonizingly long interval. No one was ever there.

One afternoon in the warm May of that year, when I had no great wish to be home and was riding this swing in the Somerset park -- pumping my way to a perilous and illicit height before letting go the clattering chain to sail off over the hill -- I noticed a man in a white, short-sleeved button-down, standing alone at the edge of the wood chips. He looked somewhat younger than my father, if similarly dressed. He wore dark slacks with a shiny chrome belt buckle, and held a briefcase by the tips of his fingers. On his face were thick-lensed glasses. I slowed my pumping.

"You shouldn't be here," he said.

Dragging my feet in the dirt, I got off the swing, thinking perhaps he was its owner.

"Listen to me," he said. "Something bad has happened, and I need you to pay attention." The man crossed a good four feet into the wood chips, so that we stood very close. The dark caverns of his nostrils seemed to fill my gaze. "Sara," he said, glancing at my badge, "there's been a terrible disaster, and we can't be outside. Your father sent me to get you."

"How do you know my dad?"

"From work," he said. This seemed sensible enough. "Come on, before the particles arrive."

"I can walk home myself," I said. The man shook his head vigorously, jiggling the briefcase in his fingers.

"No, we need to drive," he said. "It'll take too long to walk; we'll be outside too long." He looked about. "It's the particles, you see."

"It's only ten minutes from here," I said. The man seemed genuinely worried. Between his eyes, a band of scotch tape held his glasses together.

"We have to drive," he said. "I'm parked just there." He pointed to a white sedan across the empty street.

"I can't go in strangers' cars," I said.

"But I'm no stranger, Sara. I told you, I'm a friend of your father's." Squinting for a moment, as though into the sun, he said: "Your father *is* Harold Myers, isn't he?"

I nodded, secretly pleased at hearing my father's full, adult name on a stranger's lips. My father *was* Harold Myers. And so I ignored the hollowness opening in my belly, gathered up my book-bag, and went. It's impossible to remember or explain just why I walked with this man, holding him by the hand, back towards the road, away from the playground. But I felt as though a door had been opened, and was being held open, just for me, and that it wouldn't do not to walk through it.

The man's car was painted a gleaming, impressive white. He unlocked the passenger-side door, waited as I climbed in, then shut it behind me. As he circled around the fender, the car keys slipped through his fingers. He stooped, vanishing for a moment. Inside the car, everything seemed to bake and glisten. I reached out and grazed the shining rim of the steering wheel, just as the man reappeared at the driver's-side door. He fumbled to unlock it, then rustled into the seat. "Didn't anyone ever teach you to open the driver's door after being let into a car?" he said.

"No," I said. "I'm sorry."

The man then inserted his key into the ignition and turned it halfway, so that the battery came on but the engine didn't catch. A news broadcast blared from the radio.

The little clock in the dashboard flashed a quarter to four. "I need to be home soon," I said.

The man raised a finger to his lips. "Listen," he said, turning the radio up. The flesh of his forearm, as he reached, was almost alabaster, its scattered hairs like clipped bits of wire.

On the radio, a man with a foreign accent was discussing the possible path of a cloud. Currently, the cloud was hovering over East Germany; but soon it was expected to reach France and then Italy. Having recently learned some geography at school, I felt familiar with these places. "Italy is the boot," I said.

"Shhhh!" said the man.

The accented voice on the radio droned on, describing the huge size of the cloud, and the ominous rain it would drop on Poland. I wanted to ask how one went about measuring a cloud, but the man held his pointed index finger sharply aloft, poking at the still, hot air. The armpit of his shirt was a sickly yellow, and the fingers of his other hand tightened and loosened around the far edge of the steering wheel.

"Pretty soon, no one will play outdoors," said the man. "Everyone will have to stay inside."

"I only play outside."

"Do you know what poison is?"

"There's nothing to do inside."

"Listen to me: imagine if poison was something you breathed in. Imagine if the air itself was poison. What would you do?"

"But it's not," I said. I was reasonably certain that poison came only in marked bottles.

"Well just wait. First the birds will start falling dead from the sky. Then the sun will disappear. And before you know it, everyone's nose will feel a little bit itchy. And then --"

"I don't care," I said. "I want to go home."

He reached forward and gave the volume knob another twist. "Didn't you listen? Did you not hear just now? People are dying in Poland. Suffocating. Pregnant women will be having abortions." He reclined in his seat, and turned towards me. "Do you know what that means?"

"No."

"It's when a baby's life is going to be so terrible that it's better off dead. Do you understand now? Are you listening?"

I remember staring at the air vents, wondering if our voices could be heard outside the car. But still nobody around, and I knew that the thing to do was scream. Reach for the door handle, pull it, and, if need be, scratch at the man's eyes -- kick and thrash and scream until my feet were on the ground and moving swiftly across it. The man turned the ignition the rest of the way, bringing the car to life. An electronic bell now dinged about our heads, and the vents blew hard at my eyes. He shifted into reverse. Go, I said to myself. Scream.

How perfectly ordinary and unperturbed Somerset Street looked, on the other side of the windshield. The spring afternoon couldn't decide on its weather, and the ambivalent wind that had swept to and fro across the playground, dousing it with pollen,

now rustled the newly-budded branches overhanging the car. I turned towards the man as he licked away a sheen of sweat from his upper lip. *Go now.* As he reached for his seatbelt, I edged my thighs toward the door. He looked at me, with just his chin over his shoulder, and understood at once.

I went for the door handle. It wasn't like my parents' car; you had to pull the lever a bit further before the click. I pulled as hard as I could. It didn't catch the first time. "Wait," the man said. I pulled again at the lever. "You have to trust me," he said, reaching with his thin, pale fingers. The click came and the door began to open. Now I did scream. I hurled my weight against the door, as his fingers grazed my neck. His nails scratched the length of my shoulder, caught in the strap of my backpack. He snagged the beaded lanyard of my badge, snapping it loose.

The door swung open, and I had my feet on the gritty spring asphalt. I heard his seatbelt unlatch. As I ran towards Georgia Avenue, I heard him -- still hear him -- call out the two stark syllables of my name. Sa. Ra.

I ran all the way back to where Somerset rejoined Georgia Avenue. I didn't stop. There were the usual people out, the usual stores. No one seemed to notice that I was running, red-faced and breathless -- not even the policeman I passed.

Home, I let myself in with the key from the flower-box, and shot up the stairs. I found my mother propped up in bed with a magazine splayed over her chest. "Olivia," I said, but she raised a finger to her lips. On her small, black and white television, a strange scene was unfolding. Families huddled together in a space like a warehouse. Then we were outside, the sky a dense gray and, beneath it, yet more families, faces pale and stricken, waiting to get in. The line was endless. I looked for the cloud above them,

but perhaps it hadn't yet arrived. My mother shifted onto her side to look at me, wincing as she turned, and the sheet gathered at the long line of her thigh bone. On the nightstand, beside an orange pill bottle, was a napkin with a bit of bread-crust, which she reached for and began to nibble. Her eyebrows were sprinkled with dandruff.

"I want you to see this, Sara," she said, gesturing at the screen. I knelt on the floor, as I often did, and placed my chin at the edge of the bedspread. My chin had begun to quiver. Her eyes still on the screen, my mother reached slowly across the bed. Taking hold of my chin, just below the lip, she gave a sharp, deep pinch with her damp fingers, and didn't let go. I must have gasped. "Don't you cry," she said, rolling towards me then, her eyes wild and aglow. "You're old enough to see."

Right-Hearted

Call him Dominguez. He shows up in papering on a Saturday morning, wide soft face with not much of a neck, dirty ski parka over his uniform shirt and a thermal underneath that, same navy blue cargoes as everyone else, handle of his Glock disappearing up into that first roll of gut. Most guys, they sit down in my booth and hand me the case jacket, maybe snooze a bit while I go through it, and don't say a word till I start asking questions. But Dominguez, sleepy-faced though he is, smiles this soft grin like he's that kid in third grade offering to be friends when no one else will, the starter friend until you move on, finding him too depressing, too fat maybe, though even when you leave him he smiles, just that way. "Hello," is how Dominguez starts us off, which no one says around here. Maybe a "hey" or that "good-morning-sir" you get from the young ex-military guys still jarheaded up. "Hello" is different.

Dominguez drops the jacket on my table, the cover right-side up: AWIK, it says, in barely visible green ballpoint -- Assault With Intent to Kill. I look back up at Dominguez, catching a winter-cold smell off his coat. Certain officers, you associate with certain crimes; you can guess what they've brought in based on the face type. Is it a day-work face (round) or a night-work face (diamond)? How old? How lost-looking or far-gone are the eyes? Dominguez's face is too doughy, open. It's at most a Misdemeanor Theft, homeless-guy-boosting-toothbrushes-at-RiteAid kind of face. Or maybe Possession of Drug Paraphernalia, addict-in-wheelchair-drops-crack-pipe-at-McPherson-Square. An AWIK face at least has a chin.

"You the arresting officer?" I ask.

"That's me," Dominguez says, and edges forward in the booth, his elbows on my table like he's about to whisper something or else lay his head down. I give a look at his elbows and he backs off.

The Arresting Officer: this is your fall guy, credited with the arrest, who's maybe there from the start or maybe showed up two hours in, and has no idea what really went down but gets to do all the paperwork anyway, gets to stay up till ten the next morning, sitting across from duty AUSA who's chewing Pepcids and getting his ankles bit by fleas in the Superior Court basement, a person who hates the Arresting Officer not just because he's dumb and tired and sad-mouthed and helpless -- utterly helpless in this place, cop uniform and all -- but because they're both *there*. Or really, because *he's* there, the lawyer is: an educated but young-ish guy, a fancy clerkship behind him, who's come to realize he makes his living cleaning up after cops. Wiping where they missed.

Dominguez looks to be about average in his dumbness. He's pulled his elbows back from the table but still has his hands there, puffy with cold, the pinkies slightly raised, almost daintily, like a pair of antennae. I glance up as I pull his incident report out of the jacket, to see if the look on his face changes, the way some guys get that little ripple of shame around their mouths when they see me about to read. It's a nightclub stabbing from three o'clock this morning, The Love Club, New York Avenue, Northeast. Dominguez's report opens like this: "V a black male 27 years old was consuming alcoholic beverages and conversating when verbal altercation began involving S1 a BM 24 years old."

I look up and Dominguez is leaning in again, not quite elbows on the table but just about, still smiling that I'll-be-your-friend-Timmy grin. "The Love Club," he says.

"Stabbing central." He lets the words hang for a moment, seeing them in the air, then notices me dead-eying him. "What?" he says.

"Nothing," I say. I'm just waiting to see how long it takes him to put his boots up on my table and pass out cold; how badly he'll flip his shit when I tell him we'll need to do a warrant for S1's clothes, that he'll need to go find S1 in the crowded holding cell, disrobe him, right here, right now. But we aren't there yet, Dominguez and me.

"Dominguez, how long you been fifth district?"

"Four years."

"How long you been a cop?"

"Ten. No, I done eleven. Shit."

"How many more years you gonna do?"

"I don't know. Many as I need."

"How much you weigh, two-thirty?"

"No. Two fourteen. Two twelve."

"How come you haven't asked me yet to let you take a walk up to Gallery Place, go get your lunch, maybe take a nice long dump while I straighten all this fucked up paperwork out? Don't you need to take a dump, Dominguez?"

"Nope."

"You could take one anyway."

"Don't feel like it."

"Most patrol guys come in with a case like this, they're all hot-potato, hot-potato, here you go see you in a few."

"That ain't me."

"I see that."

"Overtime is overtime, man."

"You get the OT no matter what. You're not even sleeping."

"I don't like to sleep here. The fleas."

"The fleas. The fleas don't care if you're sleeping. The fleas are just hungry. Aren't you hungry?"

"Not really."

"What'd you last eat?"

"Jumbo slice."

"What'd you have on it?"

"Cheese."

"It already comes with cheese. You know that, right?"

"You can get a pizza no cheese. I seen that." Blue craters under his eyes.

"Why don't you sleep, Dominguez. I won't tell anyone."

"I'm not tired."

"Try closing your eyes."

"Nah man, I'm good, I'm good."

He watches as I turn back to the report: "S1's female companion accused V's companion W1 black female 22 years old of spilling drink on her." You can see where this is headed. I look up at Dominguez: "A stabbing, right?" He nods, grinning residually. "So you do have the knife?" His smile droops, but only a little. "Officer

Dominguez. Please tell me I'm not gonna get to the end of this and have you tell me there's no knife."

"They're working on it," he says.

I nod. "Did you get the shaman in on this yet?"

"Who?"

Dominguez apparently has never heard this one. "The MPD shaman. Lives in a hut right behind headquarters, you can't miss it. He'll be there in his loincloth; tell him you can't find the knife, and he'll throw some bones on the floor, maybe see something." Dominguez laughs. "Don't laugh," I tell him, "the guy's a fuckin' deputy chief."

Dominguez folds his arms, leans back in his busted plastic chair.

"How about cameras?" I say. "We got any video?"

"Wrong angles. Wrong parts of the club."

"The Love Club --"

"Is where it's *at*," says Dominguez, the smile springing back to that wide-open face, filling the whole thing.

Dominguez has a little Jansport backpack with him, under the table. He picks it up, reaches in for a Redskins numbers jersey, pulls it on over his uniform shirt. Cop in the next booth turns and looks at him; he's got the same jersey on over his uniform, same numbers even. He's a strawberry blond, this other cop, maybe twenty-three years old. He has his OC spray out of his belt and on the table, lying on its side; he pins it down in the center with the tip of his index finger and flicks the little canister so it spins, waits to see where it stops, looks up, and says "You're it" to no one in particular. Flicks it again.

"How long you been a lawyer?" Dominguez asks me now, breaking my trance-state with the bottle-spinner. He's smoothing down the Skins jersey over his man-boobs with his palms.

"Nine years. Three of them here."

"Why don't you work in a law *firm*, man? Make some real money." His eyes glow. They all ask this.

"I tried. But you have to pay for real money. More you want, more it costs."

Dominguez nods. He works an "I feel you" expression into his eyes, like he knows all about the upper-middle-class-white-boy blues and aren't they just about the worst blues of all.

"I pay enough for money, as it is," Dominguez says, his I-feel-you look spilling over into an ain't-that-the-truth. "Tell me, though," he says, shifting his legs beneath the table, invading my space a little. "Like what's the most you made? Like, back in the day."

"Like, enough," I tell him, letting the truth or falseness of that sort itself out.

But Dominguez presses on, his scuffed black cop boots wobbling the table leg now. "Come on, man, how much? Like we talking one-fifty, two-fifty?"

"More."

"Three-fifty?"

"Three mil," I say, looking back at his report. "An hour."

"Fuck you."

"I'm a man of means, Dominguez."

The rest of the gospel according to Dominguez. After the spilled drink, and some very choice conversating between S1 and V, the two groups move to different parts of The Love Club. Everyone has three, maybe six more cocktails. Then, two in the morning, V's ready to head home, and makes his way to the main doors, girlfriend in tow. When he gets there, he spots S1 waiting with his friends, S2 and S3, arms folded. *Come see me*. V faces them. Maybe he knows what's coming next. Knows, but doesn't care, is willing to walk into it regardless. Maybe his stomach even itches a little where the blade will go in. Maybe he thinks: *This is what a man would do.* Or maybe V doesn't think at all. Just walks.

The rest of the report reads like this:

> A physical altercation occurred at the exit doors involving V, S1, S2, and S3. Afterward, it was learned that V had been stabbed in right abdomen. Medical unit arrived and V was transported to MedStar critical care unit. END.

It always says that: END. So defense attorneys won't later claim there's some secret hidden-track missing page left out, though they always claim that anyway -- claim whatever comes to mind, depending on if the client needs a show, or if his mother's in court, snuffling through a fistful of kleenex in the third row, Sunday dress billowing out onto the thighs of the strangers next to her. If I were a cop, I think I might end my reports: "Fade to black," or maybe "Zoom out." I particularly like zoom out. That's where the camera does that slow lift above the patrol-car lights and the yellow-taped-off square of pavement and the dazed witnesses in their clothes from the night before, and the crime-scene techs swishing their flashlights back and forth; then higher still, so you get the lights of the whole sleeping city, the low-hanging glow of it all, like a silent thing nestled and breathing between its two dark rivers bent like a mother's arms. You see that

kind of thing in the better crime shows on TV, when they're trying to make that grand, amorphous point about cities and crime and America and human beings in general that nobody quite knows how to make. Zoom out isn't bad.

"So which guy stabbed V?" I ask Dominguez. "S1, S2, or S3?" Dominguez has got powdered sugar around his mouth now, from one of the donuts we only half-ironically put out on Saturdays.

"I don't know," he says, like it's an interesting sort of question. "One of the three guys." He holds up a finger as he finishes chewing. "See, afterwards they split. Then the three came back, and was in the parking lot watching. Still kinda lit, kinda amped. Bouncer recognized them by the clothes. And S1, he the one had a phoenix inked on his neck." He pauses to see whether I know what a phoenix is.

"That's a new one," I say.

"Yeah. See, I got there right when they was coming back."

"So how'd you do the ID's?"

"Bouncer. He says: 'It was those guys,' and points."

"That's what he said, 'It was those guys'? That's exactly what he said?"

"Yes sir. And then I see from the driver's licenses, S1 is Tomari Washington, S2 is --"

"'It was those guys.' You see me now, Dominguez, I'm writing this down? That's your best recollection."

"It is."

"You didn't take any handwritten notes, did you?"

"Not really."

"Not really?"

"No. Just names and stuff like that."

I put down my pen. "Give me your notes, Dominguez." He reaches into the side pocket of his cargo pants and pulls out a bent spiral notepad. I flip through it until I come to: "Marcus Denby bouncer 29 BM 202-696-5548 -- 'That's them.'"

"You wrote here, 'That's them.'"

"Yeah, that's what he said."

"Not: 'It was those guys.'"

"Look, whichever one you like."

"Did he point?"

"I think so."

I lean back in the stained gray office chair, hands clasped behind my head. "Let me ask you something, Dominguez, is this guy going to live?"

"Who, Jarrell Thomas?" That's V, if you were wondering. "I don't know. I guess it depends." Dominguez sinks back into his own chair now, mirroring me. His feet are stretched out towards mine under the table.

"What's it depend on? I mean, I know you're not a doctor or anything, Dominguez, but in your mind: what's Jarrell Thomas's life depend on?"

And Dominguez leans forward so I can smell his breath, and says: "Let me tell you something, Attorney Silverman. About me. Not everyone knows this, but I was stabbed once. Right here," he says, lifting his three shirts and pointing to his left nipple. "It was a bar fight like this, 'cept I was breaking it up. Right here in DC. I even got

taken to MedStar too, same place as this guy, Mr. Jarrell. It was real bad, like I was supposed to die. In fact, I would've died. But here's the thing: when they opened me up, there was no heart where it was s'posed to be."

"What do you mean, no heart? The hell do you take me for, Dominguez?" But his smile has dropped fully away.

"I mean they cut me down the middle, looked inside, and everything in me was reversed. Like, not mixed up or nothing, but all the organs supposed to be on the left were on the right, and vice versa."

"So you're telling me your heart is on the wrong side of your body."

"On the right side. Swear to God. You can feel it if you want," Dominguez says, raising the shirts again. "See for yourself, so you satisfied."

So I'm satisfied. "Come off it, I'm not gonna touch your chest." But he leans in over the table and holds himself there, angling in with the right nipple now.

"Go ahead," he says, "feel my pulse." But I don't make a move. "Suit yourself," he says, drawing back. "But I'm for real."

Behind Dominguez, three other cops are dozing in plastic chairs along the wall, all waiting to get their cases papered. Manila folders spilling out arrest reports, gun-registration runs, use-of-force-incident summaries, photos of bruised faces, bloody faces, lie on the floor beneath their sleep-twisted feet. Already it's pushing nine thirty. I take another sip of Free OJ (this being what we call the orange juice) and go make copies of Dominguez's paperwork. The copy machine jams repeatedly. It has no staples. I borrow a stapler from an admin who sits in her own private office, three calendars on the wall --

two cat, one Obama. When I come back to my booth, Dominguez finally has his head down on the table. It's a large head, with curly black hair, thinner than you'd think on first seeing it. And there's a loose gold necklace just visible at the nape of his neck, below the three collars. I drop the paperwork next to his face and he opens his eyes with a start.

"Dominguez, where are you from?" I ask.

He retreats again into his chair, stretches, works his fist into the small of his back. "Bowie," he says. This is where all cops live, it seems. I picture them all out there mowing their lawns at the same time in full uniform.

"No, not where do you live, Dominguez. I mean, where'd you grow up?"

"Oh. San Juan," he says, aspirating the Juan a little. "P.R."

"So I'm curious. Back in San Juan, when you were a little kid, didn't your mother ever take you in for a physical?"

"Whatchoo mean?"

"I mean, didn't any doctor ever tell her, Senora, your baby's heart's on the right side?"

"Look man, I was a *healthy* right-hearted baby. Didn't need no doctors." He smiles now -- again, the full smile.

"Fuck you, Dominguez," I say, smiling back.

"Fuck me?" Innocent.

"You think I believe no one goes to the doctor back in P.R.? Like, you're all too busy chasing chickens around the yard?" I'm tapping my nose with my pen now.

"Chickens? Nah, man. Goats. Then when you old enough you get a license and can drive a donkey."

One of the three cops by the wall kicks out his leg, hard. Dreaming. Dominguez turns around to look, the cop still with his eyes closed, then comes back. "Hey, I'm just happy to be alive, man," he says. "How about you?"

How about me. "It depends on the day," I say. "Like anyone else."

"It's funny," he says. "But some people, you just get the sense that nothing's ever happened to them. And so they think nothing ever will. Take you, for instance."

"Take me?"

"I can just tell, man. You cool and all, but nothing really's happened to you. Not yet. Like, if it had, you would have just reached out before and felt my pulse."

"All right, try me again," I say.

"Try you again? No, that's water under our bridge, man."

It takes another hour to pick apart and organize Dominguez's snow-smudged pile of paperwork, to read through and copy out his fifth-grade-style handwritten notes, to punch holes through it all, to assemble the three tabbed, collated copies, to type up my notes about his notes. Then I prep the clothes warrants. I tell Dominguez how he's going to take the clothes off of S1, S2, and S3, down in the holding cell, right below us. The marshals will give them white paper suits to wear in the arraignments court. I point at the floor as I tell him this and he looks down. You can hear the chains clink, right through the floor, whenever someone gets moved in or out. Dominguez nods.

So here's my case. Five men, all under thirty, tussle in a crowded nightclub, fifteen, maybe twenty seconds. One of them feels a little something extra, and looks down: stabbed in the gut. His own belly. He looks at it like it's the strangest thing in the world. Sometimes we make haikus out of this stuff and tape them to our office walls, like this one:

Homeless shelter brawl --
percocet, knife on the floor;
think I'll surf the web.

Or:

"Are these your drugs, sir?"
"Nah, man. They only *half* mine."
Enter Dershowitz.

This morning's might go like this:

The Love Club is where
it's *at* for gut-busting fun.
Jarrell Thomas knows.

It's not the best. Later I'll come up with a better one.

At the end of the paperwork there's a photo of Jarrell getting carted off to the ambulance. Not a bad-looking kid. Soft-eyed, like Dominguez. Rorschach of blood blooming over his belly, dress shirt stretched tight to the skin. Behind the paramedics you see the bouncer's brown bald head, sweat beaded to his scalp even though it's a cold night. Still working, still on the clock. He's the one who clamped the t-shirt over Jarrell's wound -- "keep his shit from spillin' out" is what he says in Dominguez's notes. In the photo he's staring out at the parking lot, his back to the paramedics. What's he seeing? Beyond the lights is a perfect black.

The duty super swings by my booth, tall white guy, Yale grad who either kept or invented his Indiana farm-boy accent, needing something to break the ice; guy who rides a three-thousand-dollar race bike to work from Fairfax every day, all year round, wears polo shirts to show off his biceps, never a suit because he's fixed it so he no longer sees the inside of a courtroom, never goes upstairs. If you saw him in a suit you'd think his mother had died. "How we doing here, gents?" he says, glancing at me, then Dominguez, then the three sleeping cops along the wall.

"Tip top," I say. "No knife recovered. No one seen with a knife. And no good video."

Superman nods, trying to get a read on my negativity -- is it because I don't give a shit or because I do? "Love Club?" he says.

"Yeah."

He leans over my back, picks up Jarrell's bon-voyage ambulance photo, looks at the soaked compresses in the paramedic's blue-gloved hands. "I just don't get why anyone goes to that place."

"To dance," says Dominguez.

Superman ignores him. "Our guy gonna live?" he says.

"Don't know," I say.

"Call MedStar," he says. "Make sure we don't have a homicide." Then he grabs a jelly-filled from the box behind my head, takes a bite and shoots Dominguez a look. I watch him head back to his station, where there's a huge black cop with his head lolled fully back, snoring, with a a ziplock bag holding a little .25 auto sliding off his lap. Whenever the bag gets close to slipping off his thigh the cop smacks his palm down right on the barrel of the gun without opening his eyes.

As I reach for the phone, Dominguez says: "How 'bout you, Government? You like to dance?" Government is what prosecutors get called in court. He laughs: "Like, have you *ever* danced? Wait -- I'ma guess: not since college."

"Eighth grade."

"You do the running man?"

"Like my life depended on it."

"You should try it again sometime. Take your lady out. Show her your Running Man. Take her to the Love Club." His smile back again, seeing how long I'll let him bust my balls.

"I'd fit right in."

"You wouldn't *get* in. You got a lady?"

"Maybe. Sometimes. You?"

"Maybe. No. Not right now. But I got a daughter. Seven years old. Know what she does? Hip-hop dance, like in a after-school class."

"She any good?"

"No. She's terrible," he says. Full smile.

I dial MedStar, and put the phone on speaker while the hold music plays. "What's her name, your daughter?"

"Sophia."

"What side's Sophia's heart on?"

"The right side. I mean the left -- side it's meant to be on."

"She know where yours is?"

"Sure she does. I read to her at night she puts her head on the right side, falls asleep to the beat."

"That's good, I like that."

Another four minutes, a nurse picks up in critical. Jarrell Thomas had exploratory surgery. No major organ damage, blood loss not so bad. Says I can even talk to him, if I want. I picture her propping the phone up to Jarrell's ear, the weak sound of his "hello" entering my head. "No thanks," I say.

"So Jarrell's all right," I tell Dominguez.

"That's good," he says. "That's real good."

Three hours later, I've finished drafting Dominguez's affidavit, which just might show probable cause. Superman had me re-do it three times: "Get them tighter together," he kept saying. "Have them all in a tangle, like a whirling atom. Arms flying, the knife is in the midst. Put them in a tangle." Dominguez goes and takes the clothes off the three defendants downstairs, all but the underwear. Puts the clothes in evidence bags, marks them, puts the evidence bags in a big brown lawn bag. The marshals put the defendants in moonsuits -- white paper astronaut-type get-ups -- to be brought upstairs in, to open court. Palm raised, Dominguez signs the affidavit in front of our notary. The affidavit gets stuck back in the case jacket, which gets carted out to the arraignments court with a post-it on the front for the arraignments prosecutor: "Ask for DNA," it says. And beneath that someone else writes in green ballpoint: "Good luck."

Case papered.

It's two in the afternoon now. Someone else took care of the three sleeping cops, maybe dropped their cases down to misdemeanors. Dominguez and I are free. He gives a little salute and walks out to the hallway where the vending machines are. I futz with my cell phone for a minute, then head out there, too. Dominguez is bent over at the waist, staring hard at the machine with the candy and potato chips. "What's it gonna be, officer?" I say. He catches my eye in the glass.

"I don't know," he says. "Either peanut M&M's or Animal Crackers. Which is better?"

"That depends," I say. Dominguez gives me a look. "Animal Crackers." He pushes the buttons and there's that snare-drum sound when the bag lands at the bottom of the machine. Dominguez reaches in and pulls out Animal Crackers.

Further down the hall is the arraignments court. The hallway is quiet. The little cafe where the cashier tells you to have a blessed day is closed for the weekend, and a family of four sleeps in plastic chairs against the wall, their coats like blankets pulled up to their throats. Behind us is the door to the papering office. "Hey Dominguez," I say. "You got somewhere to be right now?"

"Not really," he says.

We slip past the sleeping family, and out to the arraignments court, where we take seats in the back row. Our three moon-men clatter out from the holding cell, shackles dragging from their bare ankles, blue jail slippers on their bare feet, white paper suits blowing beneath the vents. We watch the arraignments prosecutor from behind, another young-ish guy like me. This guy's going places in the office, has a huge hard-on for justice. He makes sure to point at the three moon-men while he argues. Each time he points, the judge follows his finger with his eyes.

"See that?" I whisper to Dominguez.

"See what?" he whispers back.

I tell him to watch the judge's eyes. That this is how I know the three moon-men will be locked up. You see, no one wants to be wrong about the guy in the moonsuit. You just can't afford to be. Least of all a sitting judge. Least of all me. We err on the side of locking up, not letting go.

Dominguez nods thoughtfully. "Well, I guess I see you around then," he says. "Yeah," I say. He hands me his overtime slip, which I sign. Then he gathers up his coat and his hat, tucks them under his arm, and slips quietly out the door. I stay behind for the rest of the hearing. One of the moon-men is rocking side to side in his slippers. Their attorneys are taking notes. Held without bond.

A year passes. Another Saturday down in papering, the same warm Free OJ, same picked-over box of donuts, Superman at the helm. I get a case where a cop who's on Segway duty stops at McDonald's for a shake, comes outside and sees a twenty-year-old kid riding off on the Segway. He chases the kid down a block away, tackles him off the Segway -- which says "Police" all over it -- and pulls a hundred tabs of ecstasy out of the kid's shorts. Here's the thing: I know both of them. I prosecuted the kid for possession with intent two years ago, put him away for eight months. And the cop is patrol officer Ruben Arturo Dominguez, Fifth District -- known here as "V," for victim. Which I figure he kind of is under the circumstances, the shit he must be taking back at the station for this. I mean, bad enough to be on Segway duty to begin with, but to have some hopped-up kid steal your police vehicle in broad daylight -- which you happen maybe to have left the keys hanging out of, with your personal keychain dangling at the end: pink furry rabbit's foot, I think it was.

I picture Dominguez stepping out of the McDonald's with the chocolate shake in his hand, doing a double-take as he sees the kid buzzing off up Nannie Helen Burroughs Avenue. And what I wonder is: does he run with the shake in his hand, or does he have to throw it away right then and there, a fresh, un-sipped chocolate shake, so cold and

sweet and thick? "Crime of the century," I write on the post-it that goes out with the jacket.

Another six months go by. I'm not in papering this time, but back in my office at Triple Nickel, 555 Fourth Street. It's windowless and quiet here, which I like. And no fleas nipping at my ankles. There's another fifth-district officer sitting across from me now, and we're talking about a gas-station robbery. On the paperwork, about two-thirds of the way down the list of officers involved, I see Dominguez's name; he's one of the assisting officers -- a credit that gets given out left and right it seems, everyone wanting in on the overtime. The cop I'm talking to right now though is a thin blond guy, chain smoker, sort of rodent-faced, leather jacket, mid-forties. I don't like him too much, and he doesn't like me either, but nonetheless we need a rapport. So I ask him, with a little smirk: "How's Dominguez doing these days? Did he get a new Segway?"

"Dominguez?" this cop says. "Dominguez is dead. Poor bastard's heart, like, blew up." As he says this he brings his fingertips together, then explodes them apart. I'm staring at this cop's nose now for some reason, at the wide, shallow pores around the tip, and I start to feel it: way more loss, way more *something* than I'm ready for. "Dude's daughter found him lying in his bed. Sounded rough," he says. And I want so badly to tell this cop to leave now, or to throw him out with my eyes if I can lift them. But here's the thing: I can't even get my hands up onto the desk, where I'd use them to push myself up. I can't even move my feet. And the guy sitting here with me, this cop with the photos in his lap of the Exxon with the shattered door and the .45 that went thump-thump and the red trickle-trail leading out to the cement where the get-away car would have

been, he tells me this: that Ruben Dominguez's right-sided heart had been a time bomb, all along.

The Window-Dresser

He was thin, like most men were, and he stood on the tip-toes of one foot at the top of his step-stool. The leg of his trouser gathered about his calf, ending just over the bony ankle. Upwards he reached, aiming to pin the red sash to the top of the display, where it would hang above the horse-drawn sled with its boy and girl mannequins, their Buxton Weather-Beater boots gleaming in side view, amidst whorls of cotton snow.

He was taking too long. He'd keep raising and lowering the mannequins' necks, repainting their lips, the heads unscrewed and clenched between his knees. His wrists were bare, extending from his cuffs, like the pale core of a carrot. He'd left his cap on the radiator to dry. He had a plaid thermos in the corner, by his case of wares. He smoked without once flicking the ash, which curled and fell in great pieces from the ember.

"Is it the same one in every store?" Maura said. The man had his back to her. He was bent over the sled wheel; he looked beheaded by it. He gave a shrug without turning around. She watched him work, then said: "I never understood Christmas."

"What's to understand?" A fleck of ash dropped from his cigarette into the cotton snow. He stooped, pinched the ash between his fingers and it was gone. The girl was young, perhaps seventeen, fat-throated, pink. He felt no stirrings. His tongue sat dry in his mouth. He pointed to the thermos and she brought it to him.

"Well, suppose you don't believe in Jesus. In *the* Jesus," the girl said.

From his wares case, the man now fetched the sign: THIS CHRISTMAS, BUY THEM BUXTON BOOTS! The wooden letters were black, attached to one another with filament.

They would go beneath the red sash, running the length of the window. Then he would adjust the models, and be done. He gave the girl another shrug as he unfurled the sign.

Maura wondered if he had a wife. She pictured him returning home with the same uninterested look on his face, ascending the steps to his front door. Inside, at the table, his children's mouths would be upturned, like those of small birds, and his wife would have her hands on the backs of their chairs. He was possibly a Jew; his wife and children -- his brood -- Jewish, as well. She hadn't noticed at first, but it seemed clear now. He had a Jew's narrow shoulders and intelligent mouth, though the nose was unpronounced; the nose didn't seem to want anything.

The store was warm and dark. He'd asked her to turn out the lights and she had; the only light now came from the streetlamp. "You mind?" he said. He handed her the letter 'T,' heavier and taller than the rest, then backed away until the remaining letters hung between them. He'd used the same sign for the past four years; the sign before the war had said something else. There'd been no sled, then, either -- just the boy and the girl. People had been slower to replace their boots.

"How come you don't have Buxtons yourself?" Maura said.

The man looked down. "Oh," he said. "No one sees me." He smiled limply. His shoes were black, ghosted with salt. He rose up again on the step-stool and began fastening letters to the sash. He motioned to Maura for the next few letters. Her nose was near his belly. "They're good boots, though. Practically sell themselves." As they reached the far end of the window, Maura held onto the remaining letters, with both hands at her chest. The man motioned for them again, but she didn't move. He would have to look at her, was all. "What's the big idea?" he said. She gave a little gust of a

smile. He got off the stool and stood facing her. The letters were in the cleft between her breasts. He stared at them. Then she let go the letters, one by one, so that they rose to his fingers on the string, and he climbed back up. His hip-bones showed through his thin wool pants as he reached, pinning the final 'S.' The step-stool wobbled but he caught himself. Maura wanted to kick the step-stool from beneath his feet, to see him fall on the hardwood floor, and then to leap upon him, to feel his dark mouth at her throat.

"How old do you think I am?" she said. A fat man in a tan coat glided past the window without looking in, like a boat in a channel.

The man came down from his stool. Next came reins; the sleighs all had reins. "Sixteen," he said. He felt a tightness in his belly, as if it had been touched by the cold flat of a shovel. The girl's lips were thick and foolish. Her tongue flitted behind them. He thought: If I kissed her, I'd feel nothing. "Say, this is Palmer, isn't it?" The girl nodded. He often forgot which town he was in. But they were in Palmer, Massachusetts. He took his cap off the radiator.

"Nineteen," Maura said. "I'm nineteen." The man's fingers were long and thin, and intricate. Jewish fingers. Fit for the piano, the violin -- folk melodies, foreign yet familiar, known only to each other. He stared into his hat. She took another step toward him. On the dark wall behind her, the rows of shoes watched from their perches. Her father's shoes, the boxes stacked to the ceiling. Her father was dead. Above their heads, the tenant, Gasparov, walked back and forth across his living-room floor.

The man looked up at the sound, the ember of his cigarette close to his mouth. "That where you live?" he said. The footsteps stopped.

"No," Maura said. "We own land. By the reservoir." The words felt stupid in her mouth. The man shrugged again. Her family had a yellow, clapboard house on three acres. Her room was in the attic. They had no horses, no garden, but there was a pond, which turned silver in winter, brown in summer. She wondered if the man was hungry. She pressed her palms together; they were slick with sweat.

The man rummaged in his case and emerged with a set of long black reins. They were made of velvet. He threaded them through the boy mannequin's wooden fingers, then raised the boy's arms at the shoulder, so that the reins floated just over the snow, pulled taut by the implied horse. Reaching into the sled, the man placed one hand over the mannequin girl's eyes, and the other hand at her neck; then he tilted her head back sharply to indicate the horse's animal lurch. The girl's eyes were now fixed delightedly upwards. The man twisted at her shoulders, so that she leaned into the crook of the boy's awaiting arm. On the mannequin girl's feet were white boots with fringes. Kneeling at her side, the man took hold of her thigh and, bracing his palm in her groin, shoved her leg upwards so that it extended gaily into the air. Her face was round and fair, as was the boy's. The man stepped back and looked at them, nodding to himself.

"Where will you stay tonight?" Maura said.

The man was seated on the floor now, stuffing wooden feet into a row of boots. They were mostly children's feet, cleaved halfway to their imaginary knees. "What time is it?" he said.

It was half-past eight. "Late," Maura said. She pictured him feeding a coal-gas stove in a dank motel room, then undressing, not bothering to bathe. The man looked up from the boots, which he would place in the window, nearest the passersby. His children

did not know what he did for a living. They were in their beds, in Holyoke, resisting the inevitability of sleep, like men in the air-bubble of a sunken ship. The girl, standing over him now, was soft-thighed, animal-scented. "Give me a hand, will you," he said. She sat on the floor beside him, pressing her skirt between her legs with one hand. He gave her a wooden foot and a boot. She pushed the foot inside until its toes would go no further. When she handed it back to him, his fingers touched her wrist.

Beside them on the sled sat the mannequin boy and girl. The man pulled Maura close so that their faces were touching, but he didn't kiss her. She looked at his strange green eyes, and found his scent was sharp, an iron-like sting in her nostrils. Outside it had begun to snow, swift dry flakes. Behind the snow, Maura caught sight of her reflection, then refocused her eyes so as to look through it. Tentatively, she reached under the man's shirt and touched the flat of his chest. He allowed her hand to stay. The hand was warm, like a pot of water. He slid away, having finished with the boots, and rose to his feet, hiding his eyes. Maura remained beside the sled, facing towards the window. The air at the floor was cold, and still smelled of him. She brought her forearm to her lips and watched the window-dresser's legs as he inspected the display one last time.

The thing to do was to calm himself. He touched the two mannequin heads, each in turn, then drew back his fingers. The girl remained on the floor. From her blouse, an elbow jutted out, the skin dimpled and pink. She hadn't yet moved. Above them once more came Gasparov's footsteps. The window-dresser paused briefly to listen, then took up his wares-case, and unbolted the door. Outside, the snow fell with a hiss, like breath from the nose. He stepped tentatively out into the streetlight, and the door shut behind

him. Maura watched him go, the wares-case pulling him toward the road; his footprints were black as stones.

Curriculum Vitae

Ben Eisman was born on June 2, 1976, in Northampton, Massachusetts. He received his undergraduate degree in English from Columbia University in 1998, and a law degree from the University of Michigan in 2003. He was briefly a lawyer in private practice, clerked for a federal judge, and served as an Assistant United States Attorney in Washington, D.C.